

Simmonds again. "Will you drive me to Gloucester?" he asked.

"No, my Lord. I'm under contract to remain in Bristol five days."

"Very well. Stop in Bristol, and be blanked to you! Is there any reason why you should not take me to pick up my son's belongings? Then Dale and I can go to Hereford by train. Viscount Medenham is deuced particular about his linen. If I stick to his shirts, I shall meet him sometime today, I suppose."

Simmonds sought Dale's counsel by an underlook; but that hapless sportsman could offer no suggestion, so the other made the best of a bad business. "I'll do that, of course, my Lord," he said with alacrity. "Just grab his Lordship's dressing case from that porter and shove it inside," he went on, eyeing Dale fiercely, well knowing that the whole collapse arose from a cause but too easily traced.

"No, no," broke in the Earl, whose magisterial experiences had taught him the wisdom of keeping witnesses apart. "Dale comes with me. I want to sift this business thoroughly. Put the case in front. We can pile the other luggage on top of it. Now, Dale, jump inside. Your friend knows where to go, I expect."

THUS did two bizarre elements intrude themselves into the natural order of things on that fine morning in the West of England. The very shortness of the road between Bristol and Bath apparently offered an insuperable obstacle to the passage of Simmonds' car along it, and some unknown "chap," whose "nevy" had married the sister of a Beckhampton housemaid, became the predominating factor in a situation that affected the fortunes of several notable people.

For his part, Lord Fairholme gave no further thought to Marigny. It did not even occur to him that it might be advisable to call again at the College Green Hotel, since Medenham had slept elsewhere, and Hereford was now the goal. Certainly the Frenchman's good fairy might have pushed her good offices to excess by permitting him to see, careering about Bristol with a pair of chauffeurs, the man whom he believed to be then on the way to London. But fairies are untrustworthy creatures, likely to be off with a hop, skip, and jump, and in any case Marigny was writing explicit instructions to Devar, though he would have been far more profitably employed in lounging outside the hotel.

So everybody was dissatisfied, more or less, the quaking Dale more, perhaps, than any; and the person who had absolutely no shadow of care on his soul was Medenham himself, at that moment guiding the Mercury along the splendid highway that connects Bristol with Gloucester; taking the run leisurely too, lest Cynthia should miss one fleeting glimpse of the everchanging beauties of the Severn estuary.

DURING one of the adagio movements of the engine, Cynthia, who had been consulting a guidebook, leaned forward with a smile on her face.

"What is a lamprey?" she asked.

"A special variety of eel which has a habit of sticking to stones by its mouth," said Medenham. Then he added after a pause, "Henry I. was sixty-seven years old when he died; so the dish of lampreys was perhaps blamed unjustly."

"You have a good memory," she retorted.

"Oh, is that in your book, Miss Vanrenen? Well, here is another fact about Gloucester. Alfred the Great held a witenagemot there in 896. Do you know what a witenagemot is?"

"Yes," she said, "a smoking concert."

Mrs. Devar invariably resented these bits of byplay, since she could no more extract their meaning than if they were uttered in Choctaw. "Some very good people live in Gloucestershire," she put in. "There are the—" She began to give extracts from Burke's "Landed Gentry," whereupon the speedometer index sprang to forty-five, and a noble fifteenth century tower soon lifted its stone lacework above the trees and spires of the ancient city.

Cynthia wished to obtain some photographs of old inns; so Medenham took them to Northgate-st., where the New Inn—which is nearly always the most antiquated hostelry in an English country town—supplied a fine example of massive timberwork, with courtyard and external galleries.

The light was so perfect that he persuaded Cynthia to stand in a doorway and let him take a picture. During the focusing interval he suggested that the day's route should be varied by leaving the coast road at Westbury and running through the Forest of Dean, where a secluded hotel in the midst of a real woodland would be an ideal place for luncheon.

She agreed. Something in his tone told her that Mrs. Devar's consent to the arrangement had better be taken for granted. So they sped on.

MRS. DEVAR quitted the car at Chepstow and, to make matters worse, the feelings of Cynthia's chaperon soon became as sore as her toes. The only feature of Martens Tower, which they soon were visiting, that appealed to her was its diabolical ingenuity in providing opportunities for the interfering chauffeur to assist, almost to lift, Cynthia from one mass of fallen masonry to another. She heard Fitzroy telling her wayward charge that the reformer really hated Charles I. because the King called him an "ugly rascal" in public, and directed that he should be turned out of Hyde Park. The words supplied a cue.

"Pity Kings are not so powerful nowadays!" she snapped. "The presumption of the lower orders is becoming intolerable."

Another little incident heated Mrs. Devar to boiling point. Cynthia more than once hinted that, if tired, she might wait for them in the lowermost court, where a fine tree spread its shade over some benches; but the older woman persisted in visiting every dungeon and scrambling up every broken stair. The girl took several photographs, and had reached the last film in a roll, when the whim seized her to pose Medenham in front of a Norman arch.

"You look rather like a Baron," she said gleefully. "I wish I could borrow some armor and take you in character as the gentleman who built this castle. By the way, his name was Fitz Something or Other. Was he a relation?"

"Fitz Osborne," said Medenham.

"Ah, yes. Fitzroy means King's son, doesn't it?"

"I—er—believe so."

"Well, I can imagine you scowling out of a vizor. It would suit you admirably."

"But I might not scowl."

"Oh, yes, you would. Remember this morning. Just force yourself to think for a moment that I am Monsieur—" She stopped abruptly. "A little more to the left, please, and turn your face to the sun. There, that is capital!"

"Why should Fitzroy scowl at the recollection of Count Edouard?" demanded Mrs. Devar, her eyes devouring the telltale blush that suffused the girl's face and neck.

"Only because the Count wished to supplant him as our chauffeur," came the ready answer.

"I thought Monsieur Marigny's offer a very courteous one."

"Undoubtedly; but as I had to decide the matter I preferred to travel in a car that was at my own disposal."

Mrs. Devar dared not go further. She relapsed into sulky silence. She said not a word when Cynthia occupied the front seat for the climb through Chepstow's High-st., and when the girl turned to call her attention to the view from the crest of the famous Wyndcliff she was nodding asleep.

Cynthia told Medenham, and there was a touch of regret in her voice. "Poor dear," she said in an undertone, "the castle was too much for her, and the fresh air has made her drowsy."

He glanced quickly over his shoulder, and instantly made up his mind to breach a project that he had thought out carefully since his quarrel with the Frenchman.

YOU mean to stay in Hereford during the whole of to-morrow, Miss Vanrenen?" he asked.

"Yes. Somehow, I don't see myself scampering across the map on the British Sabbath. Besides, I am all behindhand with my letters, and my father will be telegraphing something emphatic if I don't go beyond 'Much love' on a picture postcard."

"Symons Yat is exceptionally beautiful, and there is a capital little hotel there. The Wye runs past the front door, the boating is superb, and there will be a brilliant moon after dinner."

"And the answer is?"

"That we could run into Hereford before breakfast, leaving you plenty of time to attend the morning service at the cathedral."

Cynthia did not look at him, or she would have seen that he was rather baronial in aspect just then. Sad to relate, they were speeding down the Wyndcliff gorge without giving it the undisturbed notice it merited.

"I have a kind of notion that Mrs. Devar wouldn't catch onto the boating proposition," she said thoughtfully.

"Perhaps not; but the river takes a wide bend there, and she could see us from the hotel veranda all the time."

"Guess it can't be fixed up, anyhow," she sighed.

To be continued next Sunday



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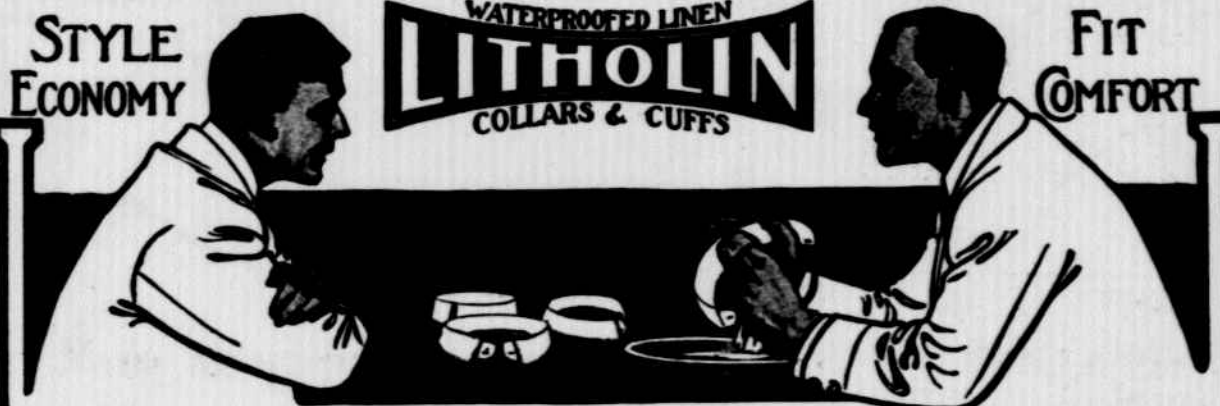
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